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Park board shuts down ice arena, makes plans for improvements

BY MARILYN THOMAS
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The Homewood-Flossmoor Park District is taking immediate steps to make improvements at the H-F Ice Arena. The facility was shut down Nov. 21 after staff found what was described as a “catastrophic failure” in the icemaking system.

The problem came just as hockey season was getting started. The H-F Ice Arena, 777 Kedzie Ave. in Flossmoor, was set to host a new tournament with 17 teams the weekend of Thanksgiving, but that was canceled, as well as all skating lessons, skater practices, scheduled games and tournaments, and Homewood-Flossmoor High School gym classes.

The park district staff was able to find ice time at a Kankakee facility for the H-F Junior Hockey League, and was working to assist other teams to find places for practices.

At the park board meeting Dec. 7, Steve Macri, president of the youth league’s parents’ association, said they appreciated the park staff’s efforts to find the young players a home, but he wondered about next steps.

Brent Bachus, president of the park board, said he knows how devastating this is for hockey players and families who support youth hockey.

He read a letter from Homewood residents Jason and Christine Romans that read in part: “We love Homewood-Flossmoor and we do not want to lose this amazing space that has given us way more than we ever expected! It is more than a structure, there is a community of team building, friendships, dedicated coaches, players, figure skaters and staff inside that building giving time, knowledge, heart and soul to our programs.”

“Believe me we feel your pain and we appreciate your patience on this, but I want you to know we’re going to do this right,” Bachus told the audience members.

The estimated cost of repair was around \$500,000, but there was no guarantee the problem with the icemaking system would be fixed.

“I can’t in good conscience say we’re going to spend a half million dollars of taxpayer money and maybe not fix the problem,” Bachus said, “especially knowing R-22 (refrigerant) is going to be obsolete.”

Parks Executive Director Debbie Kopas

said the ice arena has a system of pipes that fill with R-22 to freeze the water that makes the ice rink. Staff noticed several soft spots on the ice and looked for leaks in the pipe system. They also pumped more R-22 through the piping thinking that would be the fix, but nothing was working.

The park commissioners have been discussing updates to the ice arena since 2017, knowing that the refrigeration system was outdated. R-22 is being phased out because it is believed the coolant is one of the substances causing depletion of the ozone layer.

The building also needs updates, including a new roof, a new HVAC system and a new dehumidification system. The facility first opened in 1974, and last went through a major update in 1995.

Money was a major factor in considering how to make ice arena improvements. The estimate for repairs in 2019 was between \$3.5 and \$4.9 million. Up until mid-November, the board didn’t have the capacity to borrow that much money.

But this fall the park board moved to consolidate its outstanding debt and sold \$9.66 million in bonds at an interest rate of 2.42%. That rate gave the board a savings of more than \$1.2 million, an amount equal to 12.7% of the refunded principle amount. It also opened up additional borrowing power for the board.

Bachus said it is likely the board will need to take advantage of that new borrowing option to cover the ice arena renovation expenses.

The park district also planned to look for outside funding sources. In 2020, the board submitted an application for a state grant through the Illinois Park and Recreation Facility Construction Act, but it didn’t make the cut.

Bachus said if the grant is available in 2022, the park district will reapply for the funding. The largest grant available is \$2.5 million.

“Now is the time to do this right and get the outdated refrigeration system out of there and then see what else we can do regarding the roof and dash boards and all the other stuff. For right now, we’re going to get ice back here,” he told ice arena supporters.

Kopas said the board will be hiring a project manager to oversee the project.

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